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Back to the Roots: Socio-Economic Policy Making and Re-integration of Kerala's Gulf-Return Migrants amidst the COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Many gulf countries' migrants, particularly those from developing countries like India, have been deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Kerala, a state with high emigration rates, depends heavily on these migrant workers who form a significant part of its labour force. This research report examines how Kerala has responded to the COVID-19 crisis and highlights its distinct and notable approaches. However, most Gulf migrants work in the informal sector and are unaware of many things. These former key components of Kerala's economy return home to find themselves excluded, disorganised, and voiceless, as their rights or working environment cannot be fought for. Within the period of COVID-19, more than half a million returnees in Kerala faced numerous problems as well as socio-economic challenges. They were once breadwinners in families, but now face similar hardships within their states. This study examines the macroscopic aspects of the socioeconomic lives of marginalised migrants, as well as the social links that hinder their integration into society, both through state policies and community barriers. The article is based on a survey of 300 respondents from Malappuram and Ernakulam districts, aimed at understanding the intricacies of post-pandemic experiences.

Keywords: COVID-19; Kerala; Return migration; Re-integration; Policy research

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1. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19's global spread has resulted in a variety of measures, such as lockdowns and quarantine orders, being implemented by different countries. The healthcare, transportation, economy and finance, migration, and social dynamics have been heavily affected by this pandemic (Khan et al., 2021). In the wake of the pandemic, India has seen a notable fall in emigration to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries due to its large number of migrant workers (Abella & Sasikumar, 2020a & 2020b; Rajan, 2020). Some newspaper reports reveal how keen these Indian migrant workers and leading Middle East employers are to return home.

According to the World Migration Report 2022, India has about 6% of the world's international migrants, including three point five million from Kerala (Ullah, 2022). Thus, many Gulf migrants returned home during lockdowns for non-essential industries. Some factors that increased COVID-19 infections in Kerala included those coming back from the Gulf and a high birth rate in 2019-20. In reaction to the pandemic, over 1,500,000 people working in the Gulf came back to Kerala, thereby disrupting the state's global migration system in the year 2020 (Isaac & Sadanandan, 2021).

This study aims to explore the migration and repatriation patterns of expatriates from Kerala who had been living in the Gulf, providing insights into their experiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The United Nations, in its 2022 Report, indicates that around 18 million international migrants are from India, making it the largest recipient of remittances from overseas workers since the mid-1990s (World Bank, 2022). Remittances from non-resident Indians (NRIs) are a vital source of development funds, particularly in Kerala (Connell & Brown, 1995; The Economic Times, 2022).

The Indian migrant workforce in the Gulf includes unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled workers. Unskilled labourers often migrate due to poverty (Edumundo et al., 2011). The migration of semi-skilled workers from Kerala is influenced by factors such as unemployment after graduation, family pressure, aspirations for administrative roles, and dowry obligations (Rajendran, 2018; Wright, 2020; Zachariah et al., 2002). Recently, Kerala has seen an outflow of highly educated professionals, including doctors, engineers, and academics, to Gulf countries due to low wages, rising unemployment, shrinking productive lands, and economic pressures in India (Fazal, 2000; Rajendran, 2018). Moreover, expedited passport services have further facilitated the migration of Indian workers to the Gulf (Martin, 2012). Semi-skilled workers face challenges such as the marginalisation of women due to caste or income-based quotas, lack of family support, aspirations for independence, and reluctance to engage in menial jobs at home (Bijral, 2015; Mohan, 2017).

Highly skilled professionals migrate to GCC countries, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE due to fluency in English and Arabic, cultural adaptability, better living conditions, medical insurance, personal growth opportunities, job flexibility, and the fulfilment of unmet aspirations (Hiller and McCaig, 2007; Rasheed, 2017). Professionals are also driven by the desire to achieve career goals, support their families financially, gain social status, and enjoy a more comfortable lifestyle abroad (Nair, 2023).

Despite uncertainties, Gulf-Indians see the Gulf region as a second home. The UAE has been a preferred destination for Indian migrants for over two decades. Many Malayalees who initially arrived on temporary visas have decided to stay, viewing it as their home, especially those with professional employment or significant income growth (Iyer, 2017). NRIs often cite issues like infrastructure, power shortages, congestion, poor hygiene, and adherence to family customs as reasons for not returning to India (Gowricharn, 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered circumstances and priorities. The global economic impact of the pandemic has weakened the UAE's economy, increasing risks for government-related enterprises (Mathew, 2020). A survey by the Dubai Chamber of Commerce estimated that 70% of businesses in the Emirates might close within six months due to lockdowns (Turak, 2020).

With 80% of the UAE's population being expatriates and over 150,000 Indians ready to leave, the COVID-19 crisis could surpass the impact of the 2008-2009 fiscal crisis, as acknowledged by the government. Abu Dhabi's real GDP growth is projected to drop to 0.6% in 2020 from an expected 3.0% in 2019 (Fitch Solutions, 2020; Badam, 2020). Companies in sectors like construction, vehicle repair, and cleaning have furloughed or terminated employees or put them on unpaid leave, forcing many low-wage workers to leave their homes. Indian community organisations have stepped in to support these displaced

workers (Rahman et al, 2023). The sudden job loss among Malayalees (People who speak Malayalam, belonging to the state of Kerala, are commonly called Malayalees) in professional sectors has also affected their mental well-being, with many prioritising reunifications with relatives in Kerala. For many expatriates who lost their jobs abroad, returning to India is seen as the best option. The lack of research on premature reverse migration during a pandemic highlights the importance of studying this issue (Mathew & Kumar, 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore the socio-economic challenges faced by Gulf return migrants in Kerala during the COVID-19 pandemic. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of these challenges and offers actionable insights for policymakers.

3.1. Research Design

The study utilises an exploratory-explanatory design to examine migration patterns, post-return challenges, and the adequacy of support systems. This approach enables an in-depth investigation of the socio-economic impacts of return migration while capturing the nuanced experiences of participants.

3.1.1. Data Collection

1. Primary Data:

Quantitative Data: A structured survey was conducted with 300 return migrants from Malappuram and Ernakulam districts. The survey included closed-ended questions covering demographic information, employment history, reasons for return, and post-return socio-economic challenges.

Qualitative Data: Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were carried out with 50 purposively selected participants. These interviews explored personal narratives, reintegration experiences, and perceptions of the adequacy of support systems provided by governmental and non-governmental organisations.

2. Secondary Data:

Secondary data were sourced from the research paper authored by Rajan and Manasi (2021), i.e., official government reports, and academic literature on migration and reintegration. These data sources provided contextual depth and supported the triangulation of findings.

3.1.2. Sampling Strategy

Purposive Sampling: Survey and interview participants were selected based on their experiences of socio-economic disruptions caused by the pandemic. This approach ensured a diverse representation of occupational, educational, and demographic characteristics.

Sample Characteristics: The sample included 75% male and 25% female participants aged between 25 and 60 years. Respondents represented skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled occupational categories, reflecting the varied migration demographics of Kerala.

3.1.3. Data Analysis

1. Quantitative Analysis:

Survey data were summarised using tables to highlight trends in employment, income, and post-return challenges. Tabular presentations provided a clear and accessible visual representation of the data. Frequency distributions were calculated to determine the prevalence of specific challenges, including financial instability, lack of support, and health-related issues.

2. Qualitative Analysis:

Thematic analysis was conducted to interpret narrative data from the semi-structured interviews, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework:

- Familiarisation: Repeated readings of interview transcripts to identify key ideas and patterns.
- Selection of Keywords: In this step, the researchers fixed the appropriate keywords from the basic analysis and identify them for later processes.
- Coding: NVivo software was employed to code text excerpts systematically, tagging segments related to financial instability, health challenges, and reintegration barriers.
- Theme Development: Coded data were grouped into broader themes to capture the essence of participants' experiences.
- Reviewing Themes: Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure alignment with the research objectives.
- Defining Themes: Each theme was defined clearly to articulate its relevance and connection to the study's focus.

3. Integration of Findings:

Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated to provide a holistic understanding of the research questions. For instance, survey data on financial instability were contextualised with interview insights about its impacts on family dynamics and coping strategies. Triangulation with secondary data enhanced the reliability and depth of the analysis.

3.1.4. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical research standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring their voluntary participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. Ethical approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the host institution, ensuring compliance with research integrity guidelines.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Demographic Profile of Return Migrants

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, many people have returned to their home countries, significantly affecting Kerala's emigration, especially to Gulf countries. Kerala migrants make up 39% of the UAE's population and 23% in Saudi Arabia, with over 20% in Oman and Qatar. Most return migrants come from Saudi Arabia, followed by the UAE and Oman, influenced by changing labour policies (Sharma, 2023). This comprehensive analysis explores the migration trends and repatriation experiences of Gulf expatriates from Kerala, providing valuable insights into the socio-economic challenges and adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1: Return Migration Patterns in Kerala by District

District	*Percent of Return Migrants*
Malappuram	19.1%
Kollam	11.3%
Kozhikode	7.6%
Ernakulam	7.9%
Kannur	11.8%
Aggregate Top 5 Districts	57.7%
Other 9 Districts*	42.3%
Total (Kerala)	100%

*Note: The remaining 9 districts in Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, Pathanamthitta, Alappuzha, Kottayam, Idukki, Thrissur, Palakkad, Wayanad, and Kasaragod, represent the combined percentage of return migrants in the remaining districts of Kerala. S*ource:* Centre for Development Studies (CDS) (2018)

Table 1 provides data on the return migration of expatriates to various districts in Kerala, focusing on the top five districts. Malappuram has the highest percentage of return migrants, followed by Kollam, Kozhikode, Ernakulam, and Kannur. The study primarily focuses on these districts. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the return of over 15 million Non-Resident Keralites (NRKs) to Kerala (Chathukulam & Tharamangalam, 2021). This mass return poses significant challenges to their financial

stability. For example, in Malappuram, nearly one-third of households have an NRK, contributing significantly to the state's revenue (Zachariah & Rajan, 2010, 2011). The return of migrants impacts both the expatriate families and those left behind, affecting Kerala's economy, which heavily relies on remittances (Oommen, 2020). Studies show that many returnees from the Gulf face financial hardships and have not seen improved socio-economic conditions (Rajan, 2020). The return also brings societal tensions, affecting children's education and the emotional well-being of migrant mothers (Osella & Osella, 2008). The economic slowdown during the 2008 crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic has particularly affected immigrant communities.

The characteristics of returnees vary in age, gender, marital status, and education. During the COVID-19 crisis, there has been an increase in female return migrants (Sulaiman et al., 2021). There are disparities in living standards between highly educated expatriates and those with lower education levels. Religious affiliations of the respondents include Muslims, Hindus, and Christians (Zachariah and Rajan 2015). This study aims to understand the economic and social challenges faced by returnees in Kerala, analyse the impact of COVID-19 on Gulf expatriates from the region, and propose measures to improve the well-being of repatriated migrants.

The study employed a mix of primary and secondary methodologies, including observation and interview schedules, collecting primary data through long-distance telephone interviews. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were used to explore the impact of COVID-19 on return migrants. Purposive sampling selected a sample of 300 migrants affected by COVID-19, primarily from Ernakulam and Malappuram. The study examines the respondents' occupations before their return from the Gulf, considering the region's oil boom and its attraction for global migrants, particularly from India, including Kerala (Ansari and Rahman, 2021).

Table 2: Employment Sectors Chosen by Gulf Expatriates

Employment/Occupation	*Districts (Ernakulam)*	*Districts (Malappuram)*	*Total*	*Percentage (%)*
Accountant	12	8	20	6.7
Business (Small Shops/Small Business)	25	20	45	15.0
Driver	22	18	40	13.3
House Servant	15	10	25	8.3
Home Nurse/Nurse	10	7	17	5.7
Cook	20	25	45	15.
Electrician	18	12	30	10.
Construction	20	18	38	12.7
Supermarket/Sales	18	12	30	10.
Grand Total	160	140	300	100

A significant number of Gulf migrants did not plan adequately, resulting in only a few securing their desired jobs. Many accepted available jobs to sustain their lives, aiming for a better standard of living and stable income (Rahman et al., 2020). To meet basic needs, 15% of migrants started small businesses, despite the substantial initial investment. Among the respondents, 6.7% worked as accountants in private companies, appearing to have better job prospects, while 13.3% worked as drivers, often for long hours. Domestic servants (8.3%) took care of children and the elderly in the absence of their employers. Construction workers and supermarket employees made up 12.7 % and 10 % of the workforce, respectively, often working over 12 hours a day. This finding aligns with previous research by Rajan et al. (2020), Sulaiman et al. (2021), and Ansari and Rahman (2021).

4.2. Case Analysis 1: Economic Challenges Post-Return

This case highlights the experience of Anjali (name changed), a 37-year-old resident of Ernakulam, who faced significant economic hardships after returning from the Gulf due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the shutdown of her small business in Kuwait, in which she had invested Rs. 1 million, she was forced to return to Kerala in 2019. Seeking new opportunities, she invested Rs. 2millions in managing container trucks but encountered substantial losses of Rs. 0.9 million due to political interference and high maintenance expenses. In an attempt to recover, Anjali and her friends opened a grocery store in Kochi but

incurred additional losses of Rs. 1.1 million, wiping out her savings from Kuwait. She now relies on bank loans to sustain her family and meet daily expenses. Facing mounting debts, Anjali is contemplating emigrating again to repay her liabilities. This case underscores the economic vulnerabilities and financial struggles faced by return migrants navigating reintegration into their home state.

4.3. Return Migration and Its Causes

Interviews with Kerala expatriates in the Gulf revealed various reasons for leaving their homeland. These factors are directly or indirectly related to the reasons for migrant labour.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Return Migration

Factors Influencing Return Migration	*No of Respondents*	*Percentage (%)*
Impact of COVID-19 (Job Loss, Salary Reduction, etc.)	135	45
Insufficient Wages	30	10
Non-Renewal of Contract due to Covid-induced Economic Reasons	15	5
Nationalisation	45	15
Unsatisfactory Working Conditions	15	5
Personal Issues at Home	15	5
Employer's Inappropriate Behaviour	30	10
Poor Health	15	5
Other Factors	-	-
Total	300	100

The research shows that the primary reason for the return of Gulf migrants to Kerala was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 45 % of respondents reported being directly affected by the pandemic, making it challenging to find employment upon their return. Additionally, more than 10 % reported lower incomes and inability to save due to reduced earnings during the pandemic. About 5 % mentioned that their contracts were not extended due to COVID-19 restrictions. Approximately 20 % attributed their return to Gulf nationalisation policies, while 10 % cited employer aggression.

4.4. Case Analysis 2: Employment Challenges Post-Migration | Case Study 2: Ramesh's Story

Ramesh, a 34-year-old man from Malappuram, worked as an HR manager with a monthly salary of Rs 85,000. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he lost his job and now faces unemployment in Kerala. He has a housing loan with a monthly interest payment of Rs 60,000 for a loan amount of around Rs 3.2 millions. Repaying the loan has become difficult given his current financial situation. Even if he finds employment in Kerala, the potential salary would be limited to around Rs 30,000-35,000 per month, raising concerns about meeting his family's financial needs and healthcare expenses. Considering these challenges, he is contemplating returning to Abu Dhabi as an alternative solution.

4.5. Challenges Faced by Returning Migrants

Returning migrants face various challenges in their home countries. Lack of a stable income can lead to accumulating debts to cover ongoing expenses. Ventures into unfamiliar businesses and personal financial obligations such as weddings, private education for children, or unexpected medical expenses further increase the vulnerability of migrants upon their return.

Table 4: Challenges Faced by Return Gulf Migrants in Kerala

Challenges	*Number of Respondents*	*Percentage (%)*
COVID-19 Impact	150	50
Insufficient Earnings/Wages	45	15
Health Expenses/Surprises	45	15
Lack of Social Respect	23	7
Lack of Government Support	30	10
Other	7	2
Total	300	100

The challenges encountered by return migrants are varied. The most frequently cited issue is the impact of COVID-19, which affected 50 % of respondents, leading to the loss of livelihoods and well-being. Around 15 % of respondents expressed concerns about maintaining a better standard of living, and more than half worried about unforeseen health issues impacting their families. About 7.5 % mentioned a lack of social respect and support from the government upon their return. Additionally, 10 % of respondents felt a loss of social acceptance within their communities, having previously been high-earning members of their families. Return migrants often find that their previous status as "Pravasi" (Gulf migrants) afforded them respect and financial stability, which is challenging to regain once back in Kerala (Khan, 2014). They sometimes feel undervalued despite years of hard work abroad.

4.6. Case Analysis 3: Health and Financial Challenges Post-Return

This case illustrates the experience of Vijay (name changed), a 45-year-old returnee from Kerala, who faced severe health and financial challenges after contracting COVID-19 while working in Oman. Earning Rs. 75,000 per month before the pandemic, Vijay's situation drastically changed when he fell into a six-month coma in February 2020. His medical treatment at a government hospital cost over 2850 riyals, which was partially supported by his Egyptian sponsor and a charitable organisation.

Upon returning to Kerala, Vijay and his family have struggled financially, relying on Rs. 10,000 per month from friends and charitable organisations. The financial strain on these charities, due to the broader economic impact of COVID-19, has created uncertainty about the sustainability of this support. As the sole breadwinner, Vijay's wife has had to depend on family and friends for additional assistance. The family also raised Rs. 1 million for his medical expenses through charitable and religious organisations. Despite these efforts, they currently receive no government financial assistance. This analysis highlights the critical health-related vulnerabilities and the economic insecurity faced by Gulf returnees, underscoring the need for targeted government support and sustainable reintegration policies.

Table 5: Policies by Society and Policymakers to Support the Integration of Returning Migrants in Kerala

Integration Measures for Returnees in Kerala	*Malappuram*	*Ernakulam*	*Total*	*Percentage (%)*
Platform for COVID-19 Affected Return Migrants: Issue Discussion and Support	42	42	84	28.0%
Promoting Entrepreneurial Skills Development Program (ESDP) policies among Young Migrants	24	30	54	18.0%
Medical Support for Return Migrants: Free and Compulsory Basic Facilities	30	42	72	24.0%
Counselling for Vulnerable Return Migrants to Address Their Difficulties in Adapting	15	15	30	10.0%
Strong Government Policy and Civil Society Support	24	36	60	20.0%
Total	135	165	300	100.0%

A notable portion of respondents (28%) highlighted the necessity for a dedicated platform to address the challenges faced by return migrants, particularly those affected by COVID-19. This platform is deemed crucial for informing policy development related to returned migrants in the state. Additionally, 18% of participants believed that establishing new projects with government support specifically targeting Gulf return migrants would significantly enhance their economic stability and prospects. Encouraging young migrants to participate in the Entrepreneurial Skills Development Program (ESDP) was suggested by 18% of respondents. Moreover, 24% emphasised the importance of accessible and mandatory basic healthcare facilities for returned migrants, ensuring their ability to afford medical expenses without relying on family or charitable organisations. These goals can be achieved through collaboration with NORKA, non-governmental organisations, and immigrant rights advocacy groups. Additionally, 10% of respondents highlighted the need for counselling sessions targeting older return migrants who may face physiological and psychological challenges in adapting to the fast-paced demands of society. Over a quarter of expatriates expressed a desperate need for new forms of assistance from the government and civil society.

4.7. Post-Pandemic Implications for Gulf Returnees in Kerala

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted Gulf returnees in Kerala, highlighting the vulnerabilities of migrants compelled to return due to economic shutdowns in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Over 1.5 million individuals returned, placing significant strain on Kerala's socio-economic infrastructure, which is heavily dependent on remittances (Rajan, 2020). These returnees encountered considerable challenges as they reintegrated into an unprepared local economy, faced with new social and economic realities (Rajan and Pattath, 2023).

Entering 2024, a marked shift is occurring as Gulf countries reopen their policies and borders to migrants from Kerala, revitalizing traditional migration routes. This development reaffirms the Gulf as a key destination for many Malayalees in search of improved economic prospects, potentially stabilising Kerala's economy through enhanced remittance flows and job opportunities for returnees. Nevertheless, this revival also emphasises the critical need for robust migration policies that protect migrant welfare and address vulnerabilities highlighted by the pandemic (Vijayan et al., 2020). Strategic planning and international cooperation are vital to ensuring that economic recovery fosters sustainable growth for the diaspora (Rahman et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the post-pandemic landscape in Kerala illustrates a mix of opportunities and persistent challenges. The reopening of the Gulf enhances its appeal to migrants, although the residual effects of the pandemic underscore the necessity for strong local and international support systems. Migration appears to be a favourable option for COVID-19 returnees striving for a better livelihood for their families and to alleviate debts. Migration is a continuous journey for many Keralites, perpetually in search of better opportunities. The potential for significant remittance recovery exists, yet the socio-economic conditions of returnees demand structured support to reduce the risk of future disruptions. Robust legal frameworks and bilateral agreements are essential to safeguard workers' rights, ensuring that the resurgence in migration is advantageous for all involved parties. This balanced approach is critical for effectively navigating post-pandemic migration and maximising the contributions of the diaspora to Kerala's development.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Obstacles and Conclusions of the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic has left Gulf return migrants in Kerala economically vulnerable. This is evident from the 65% of respondents who identified job losses, pay cuts, and contract expirations as the primary reasons for their return (Table 3). Migrants like Ramesh, who earned Rs. 5,000 a month as an HR manager abroad, now face drastically reduced local earnings of Rs. 30,000- Rs. 35,000. This significant drop in income has made it nearly impossible for returnees to sustain loan repayments, mortgage obligations, or medical expenses (Case Study 2). The study also highlights the diverse occupational backgrounds of returnees, with 15% previously owning small businesses and 13.3% working as drivers (Table 2). While these professions offered stability abroad, opportunities in Kerala are limited, forcing returnees into financial and social vulnerabilities as they struggle to maintain their previous economic standing.

5.2. Socio-Economic Vulnerabilities

The most pressing issue for returnees is financial instability, as reported by 50% of respondents. Additionally, 15% identified health-related expenses as a significant challenge, while another 15% highlighted inadequate earnings (Table 4). The lack of well-paying local jobs forces many returnees to take up casual or low-paying work, making it difficult to support their families and repay debts. Social reintegration also remains a challenge, with 7.5% of respondents reporting a lack of social respect. This reflects the stigma faced by returnees who were once viewed as economic providers but are now perceived as financially burdened. The absence of sufficient government support exacerbates these challenges. Only 24% of respondents felt that adequate healthcare policies were in place to facilitate their transition, while 28% emphasised the need for targeted healthcare systems to address emerging challenges (Table 5). These findings underscore the urgent need for sustainable reintegration programmes to address the socio-economic vulnerabilities of returnees.

5.3. Policy Recommendations and the Way Forward

The study points to the necessity of skill development programmes and entrepreneurship initiatives, with 18% of respondents highlighting their importance. Free or subsidised healthcare services could also play a crucial role in easing the burden on returnees, enabling them to focus on rebuilding their lives without falling into debt. Establishing bilateral agreements with Gulf countries could provide more secure job opportunities and protections for future migrants, reducing their exposure to vulnerabilities during economic downturns. At the same time, fostering sustainable community-based employment and development initiatives within Kerala could reduce reliance on remittances while enhancing the region's economic resilience.

5.4. Broader Implications

Kerala's historical reliance on Gulf migration has underscored the need for economic diversification. The pandemic revealed the fragility of over-dependence on remittances, highlighting the importance of investing in reintegration strategies for returnees. Addressing key areas such as earnings, social respect, and government support could transform the challenges of return migration into opportunities for economic growth and sustainable development in Kerala.

6. CONCLUSION

Research on the impact of emigration and remittances primarily focuses on broad economic impacts, often overlooking the individual and local effects of migration. Notably, there is a considerable gap in understanding the experiences of Gulf return migrants to Kerala, especially against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study addresses this gap by examining the challenges and adjustments faced by these migrants, alongside evaluating the effectiveness of existing support networks. By concentrating on individual experiences, this research enhances our understanding of the pandemic's impact on the Kerala diaspora in the Gulf States, with a particular focus on the unique situations of low-income migrants.

The post-pandemic era has brought about significant shifts in migration patterns, with many returnees facing persistent socio-economic challenges. The reopening of borders and the resumption of economic activities in the Gulf present opportunities and risks, necessitating adaptive and forward-looking policy frameworks. The insights from this study are vital for shaping policy measures aimed at improving the welfare of Gulf returnees. Understanding their specific needs allows for the development of targeted support mechanisms that facilitate smoother reintegration into Kerala's social and economic life. Future research should persist in exploring these individual experiences to offer a detailed perspective on the challenges induced by COVID-19, as well as on the broader economic and social shifts affecting these migrants. By filling this research gap, we can develop informed policies that not only aid in effective reintegration but also contribute to the sustainable development of the community. This strategic approach is crucial for reinforcing Kerala's resilience and economic stability in the face of ongoing global changes.

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8. ANNEXURES

Annexure-1: Questionnaire

Consent

☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the purpose of this study and voluntarily agree to participate.
☐ I understand that my responses will be treated confidentially and anonymously, and that I can withdraw at any time.

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Gender:
   ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other ☐ Prefer not to say
2. Age Group:
   ☐ 18–25 ☐ 26–35 ☐ 36–45 ☐ 46–60 ☐ 60+
3. District of Residence in Kerala: _____
4. Educational Qualification:
   ☐ No formal education ☐ Secondary school ☐ Undergraduate ☐ Postgraduate or higher
5. Religion:
   ☐ Hindu ☐ Muslim ☐ Christian ☐ Other (please specify): _____

Section B: Migration History

6. Which Gulf country did you return from?
   ☐ UAE ☐ Saudi Arabia ☐ Qatar ☐ Oman ☐ Kuwait ☐ Bahrain ☐ Other: _____
7. Total duration of stay abroad:
   ☐ Less than 1 year ☐ 1–3 years ☐ 3–5 years ☐ More than 5 years
8. Occupation before returning:
   ☐ Accountant ☐ Driver ☐ Shop/Business Owner ☐ Cook
   ☐ Home Nurse ☐ House Servant ☐ Supermarket/Sales ☐ Electrician ☐ Construction ☐ Other:_____
9. Were you able to save money while abroad?
   ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Partially
10. Reason for return (Tick all that apply):
    ☐ COVID-19 Job Loss ☐ Salary Cut ☐ End of Contract ☐ Nationalisation Policies
    ☐ Employer Behaviour ☐ Health Issues ☐ Personal or Family Reasons ☐ Poor Working Conditions

Section C: Socio-Economic Challenges

11. What challenges are you currently facing? (Select all that apply)
    ☐ Financial Instability ☐ Health Expenses ☐ Lack of Employment ☐ Loan Repayment
    ☐ Lack of Social Respect ☐ Lack of Government Support ☐ Mental Stress ☐ Other: _____
12. Do you currently have any form of employment?
    ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Part-time/Casual
13. Are you considering migrating again to a Gulf country?
    ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not sure

Section D: Suggestions for Support and Reintegration

14. What kind of support do you believe would help returning migrants? (Select all that apply)
    ☐ Financial Assistance or Loans ☐ Medical Support ☐ Job/Skill Training
    ☐ Entrepreneurship Programmes (ESDP) ☐ Counselling Support ☐ Community Support Platform
15. Are you aware of any government or NGO initiatives supporting Gulf return migrants?
    ☐ Yes ☐ No

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your responses will help shape policy decisions and support frameworks for Gulf return migrants in Kerala.

Annexure-2: Interview Schedule

1. Gender:
☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Other ☐ Prefer not to say

2. Age Group:
☐ 18–25 ☐ 26–35 ☐ 36–45 ☐ 46–60 ☐ 60+

3. District of Residence in Kerala:

4. Educational Qualification:
☐ No formal education ☐ Secondary school
☐ Undergraduate ☐ Postgraduate or higher

5. Religion:
☐ Hindu ☐ Muslim ☐ Christian ☐ Other (please specify): _____

6. In which GCC country did you work?

7. In which sector did you work?

8. What were the main reasons that led to your return migration to Kerala?

9. How did COVID-19 affect you and your family?

10. Please describe your experience after returning from the Gulf:

11. What major differences have you observed in your life before and after returning?

12. What further actions or support would you recommend for better reintegration of Gulf returnees in Kerala?

13. Are you aware of any policies or schemes available for return migrants in Kerala? If yes, please specify:

14. What health and financial challenges have you or others faced as return migrants?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this interview schedule.
Your responses are valuable in shaping policies and support frameworks for Gulf return migrants in Kerala.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATIONS AND ESSENTIAL ETHICAL COMPLIANCES

Author's Contributions (in accordance with ICMJE criteria for authorship)

Contribution	*Author 1*	*Author 2*
Conceived and designed the research or analysis	Yes	Yes
Collected the data	Yes	No
Contributed to data analysis & interpretation	Yes	Yes
Wrote the article/paper	Yes	No
Critical revision of the article/paper	Yes	Yes
Editing of the article/paper	Yes	Yes
Supervision	Yes	No
Project Administration	Yes	No
Funding Acquisition	No	No
Overall Contribution Proportion (%)	70	30

Funding
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Research involving human bodies or organs or tissues (Helsinki Declaration)
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not involved any human subject (body or organs) for experimentation. It was not a clinical research. The contexts of human population/participation were only indirectly covered through literature review. Therefore, an Ethical Clearance (from a Committee or Authority) or ethical obligation of Helsinki Declaration does not apply in cases of this study or written work.

Research involving animals (ARRIVE Checklist)
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not involved any animal subject (body or organs) for experimentation. The research was not based on laboratory experiment involving any kind of animal. Some contexts of animals are also indirectly covered through literature review. Therefore, an Ethical Clearance (from a Committee or Authority) does not apply in cases of this study or written work.

Research on Indigenous Peoples and/or Traditional Knowledge
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not involved Indigenous Peoples as participants or respondents, with the documentation of their Indigenous Knowledge. Some other contexts, if any, of Indigenous Peoples or Indigenous Knowledge are only indirectly covered through literature review. An Ethical Clearance 'to conduct research on indigenous peoples' Indigenous knowledge is also not relevant. Therefore, an Ethical Clearance (from a Committee or Authority) or prior informed consent (PIC) of the respondents or Self-Declaration in this regard does not apply in cases of this study or written work.

Research involving Plants
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has not involved the plants for experiment or field studies. The contexts of plants were only indirectly covered through literature review. Thus, during this research the author(s) obeyed the principles of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention on the Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

(Optional) Research Involving Local Community Participants (Non-Indigenous)
The author(s) solemnly declare(s) that this research has involved local community participants or respondents belonging to non-Indigenous peoples. This study did not involve any child in any form

directly. The contexts of different humans, people, populations, men/women/children and ethnic people are also indirectly covered through literature review. Therefore, an Ethical Clearance (from a Committee or Authority) and prior informed consent (PIC) of the respondents in this regard are appended.

(Optional) PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)
The author(s) has/have NOT complied with PRISMA standards. It is not relevant in case of this study or written work.

Competing Interests/Conflict of Interest
Author(s) has/have no competing financial, professional, or personal interests from other parties or in publishing this manuscript. There is no conflict of interest with the publisher or the editorial team or the reviewers.

Attribution and Representation
All opinions and mistakes are the author(s)' own and cannot be attributed to the institutions they represent. The publisher is also not responsible either for such opinions and mistakes in the text or graphs or images.

Declaration of the Use of AI
During the preparation of this work, the authors used no AI to assists the script translation and proof reading.

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To see original copy of these declarations signed by Corresponding/First Author (on behalf of other co-authors too), please download associated zip folder [Ethical Declarations] from the published Abstract page accessible through and linked with the DOI: https://doi.org/10.33002/jpg050103.

INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM FROM RESPONDENTS
(Non-Indigenous Respondents)
This form was translated into local language for the respondents

Title of the Research: Back to the Roots: Socio-Economic Policy Making and Re-integration of Kerala's Gulf-Return Migrants Amidst the COVID-19

Principal Researcher:	Dr Ansari PA, Lecturer and Module Coordinator Results Consortium in partnership with Leeds Trinity University, United Kingdom, Email : ansari@resultsco.ac.uk, Mobile : +44 7543502832
Research Supervisor:	Dr Sameer Babu M, Associate Professor, DES, JMI, New Delhi-110025, India

A) INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS

1. Objectives of the research
The objectives of this study were to examine Socio-Economic Policy Making and Re-integration of Kerala's Gulf-Return Migrants Amidst the COVID-19

2. Participation in research
The researcher will ask you several pertinent questions. This interview will be recorded in written form and should last about 50-60 minutes. The location and timing of the interview will be determined by you, depending on your availability and convenience.

3. Risks and disadvantages
There is no particular risk involved in this project. You may, however, refuse to answer any question at any time or even terminate the interview.

4. Advantanges and benefits
You will receive intangible benefits even if you refuse to answer some questions or decide to terminate the interview. You will also contribute to a better understanding of the Socio-Economic Policy Making and Re-integration of Kerala's Gulf-Return Migrants Amidst the COVID-19

5. Confidentiality
Personal information you give us will be kept confidential. No information identifying you in any way will be published. In addition, each participant in the research will be assigned a code and only the researcher will know your identity.

6. Right of withdrawal
Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you can at any time withdraw from the research on simple verbal notice and without having to justify your decision, without consequence to you. If you decide to opt out of the research, please contact the researcher at the telephone number or email listed below. At your request, all information concerning you can also be destroyed. However, after the outbreak of the publishing process, it is impossible to destroy the analyses and results on the data collected.

B) CONSENT

Declaration of the participant

- ⇨ I understand that I can take some time to think before agreeing or not to participate in the research.
- ⇨ I can ask the research team questions and ask for satisfactory answers.
- ⇨ I understand that by participating in this research project, I do not relinquish any of my rights, including my right to terminate the interview at any time.
- ⇨ I have read this information and consent form and agree to participate in the research project.
- ⇨ I agree that the interviews be recorded in written form by the researcher: Yes ( ) No ( )

Signature of the participant : _____ Date : _____

Surname : _____ First name : _____

Researcher engagement

I explained to the participant the conditions for participation in the research project. I answered to the best of my knowledge the questions asked and I made sure of the participant's understanding. I, along with the research team, agree to abide by what was agreed to in this information and consent form.

Signature of the researcher : Ansari Date : 15-03-2025

Surname: PA First name: Ansari

- ⇨ Should you have any questions regarding this study, or to withdraw from the research, please contact Mr. Ansari PA by e-mail : ansaripa101@gmail.com
- ⇨ If you have any concerns about your rights or about the responsibilities of researchers concerning your participation in this project, you can contact Dr Sameer Babu M, Associate Professor, DES, JMI, New Delhi-110025 by email : msameer@jmi.ac.in

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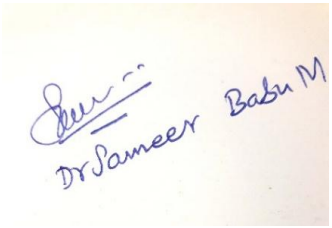
Date: 29/06/2024

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Greetings!

This is to certify that the Ethical board of the CLMLMS has arranged a meeting to discuss the ethical approval of the paper authored by Dr Ansari PA and Dr Sameer Babu M entitled "Back to the Roots: Socio-Economic Policy Making and Re-integration of Kerala's Gulf-Return Migrants amidst the COVID-19". Considering the submitted tools and basic proposal, the committee has decided to approve the paper to be carried out with a research component. The members suggested the authors to be very confidential while managing the interview response. Please feel free to reach out to the undersigned at msameer@jmi.ac.in for any further information or clarification.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Sameer Babu M